

**“SORRY ABOUT OUR PRIME MINISTER” – SOCIAL
MOVEMENT RESPONSES TO GOVERNMENTAL
ANTI-REFUGEE DISCOURSE IN HUNGARY**

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1. Research background. Problem statement

During the summer of 2015 – the ‘long summer of migration’ (Kasperek & Speer, 2015) – hundreds of thousands of refugees crossed Hungary, mostly towards other Central and Western European countries on the Balkan route, not without hindrance and conflicts. In the meantime, the government, rather than providing effective help to those crossing, engaged in a forceful anti-refugee campaign coupled with legislative changes that would make Hungary far less hospitable to refugees than ever before and than any other country in the European Union, and with the building of a fence on the Southern border of Hungary. Nevertheless, Hungarian social movements did not stay unresponsive neither to the arrival of refugees nor to the governmental propaganda. An unprecedented number of people organized to provide aid and information to those crossing, initiatives to counter the government’s campaign appeared on Hungarian streets as well, while local conflicts also arose.

The thesis discusses social movement responses to governmental anti-refugee propaganda in Hungary from 2015. Theoretically, its approach lies at the intersection of the study of securitization of forced migration, populist discourses, social movements and mediatization. It is based on an analysis of case studies carried out in 2015, among three relevant social movements, these case studies are contextualized by an analysis of the populist mediatized construction of ‘crisis’ in Hungary.

The research questions of the present thesis are the following:

RQ1: What are the threats that arise in the Hungarian mediation opportunity structure during the construction of the ‘refugee crisis’?

RQ2: How do social movements arising in response to the construction of the ‘refugee crisis’ perceive and make use of the mediation opportunity structure, with a special focus on their media practices?

RQ3: What do we know about the opportunities and the related outcomes in the mediation opportunity structure regarding the contestation of the refugee issue in Hungary?

RQ4: Why did the construction of the ‘refugee crisis’ contribute to the strengthening and consolidation of the Orbán-government?

2. Research methodology

Methodologically the research relies on the integration of independent case studies. Such an approach allows the researcher to expand the understanding of a particular issue and integrate it into a broader analytical framework (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009, p. 475). While such an approach brings benefits to the research, it also leads to further complexities. While each independent case study has its own methodology, driven by the context and the nature of the data, an integration of these independent methodologies into a single research design is still necessary. The integration of independent case studies might seem similar to, but is not equivalent with comparative case study research (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009, p. 475). In the case of the latter the comparative angle is already part of a predesigned research strategy. In my case, however, “comparison emerges from an ex post facto realization” (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009, p. 475) that comparison adds to the explanatory power of independent analytical insights.

As explained by Gillham (2000), in case study research, a case has four core characteristics: (1) it is a unit of human activity embedded in the real world; (2) it can be understood only in context; (3) it exists in the here and now; and (4) it merges in the context so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw (Gillham, 2000, p. 1).

The rationale behind case study research is given by the consideration that in certain research contexts in-depth knowledge about particular examples is analytically more useful than surface knowledge gathered

from a large number of cases (Gerring, 2006, p. 1). Given all this, the character of case study research is not so much defined by its methodological choices – as it can be either quantitative or qualitative, rely on ethnography, observation, surveys or interviews – but on its research design serving the above described gathering of in-depth knowledge. There is no consensus in the literature whether single-case studies have a distinct methodology in comparison to multiple-case studies (Yin, 2002, p. 46). The research design described below belongs to the latter group (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009, p. 582).

The present thesis relies on *exploratory case studies* (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009, p. 372) that also have an obvious influence on research design, both in terms of limitations (lack of preformulated hypotheses) and in terms of advantages (the use of abduction).

A *research design* is “a plan that guides the investigator in the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting observation. It is a logical model of proof that allows the researcher to draw inferences considering causal relations, among the ‘variables’ under investigation” (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1992, p. 77-8). As discussed by Yin, in the case of case studies the five steps of research design are (1) a study’s questions; (2) the study propositions; (3) unit(s) of analysis; (4) the logic of linking the data to propositions; and (5) the criteria for interpreting the findings (Yin, 2002).

- (1) Regarding the study’s questions, the first chapter introduced them as follows:

RQ1: What are the threats that arise in the Hungarian mediation opportunity structure during the construction of the ‘refugee crisis’?

RQ2: How do social movements arising in response to the construction of the ‘refugee crisis’ perceive and make use of the mediation opportunity structure, with a special focus on their media practices?

RQ3: What do we know about the opportunities and the related outcomes in the mediation opportunity structure regarding the contestation of the refugee issue in Hungary?

RQ4: Why did the construction of the ‘refugee crisis’ contribute to the strengthening and consolidation of the Orbán-government?

- (2) Regarding the study’s propositions, in case of exploratory case studies, the nature of the research justifies the lack of such predefined propositions. Nevertheless, such studies still need to define a purpose by which judgements regarding the success of the research can be made (Yin, 2002). The purpose of the present study has been to provide a rich description of the research questions as they unfold, identifying the emergent themes and case features in real-time. Utilizing the inherent advantages of real-time research (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009, p. 783-4) the purpose has been to investigate phenomena as they occur, allowing flexibility, and an openness of outcomes.

- (3) The selection of the units of analysis is never a straightforward issue. Instead of general rules, the selection of cases is always heavily dependent on research goals and contexts. However, it is commonly accepted that in multiple case studies the number of cases is quite limited, usually falling between 2 to 10 cases (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009, p. 61). Sampling in case study research is generally purposeful – as opposed to random sampling – and is clearly oriented towards information-rich cases for in-depth study (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009, p. 837). The case selection for the present research relies on Mill's method of difference (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009, p. 62) which is particularly suitable to exploratory research questions. Here cases are selected “that have the same or comparable circumstances, but that differ in the presence or absence of the phenomenon they want to study” (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009, p. 62). My aim with case selection has been therefore to compare cases that are maximally different except for the context in which they fit.
- (4) Linking data to propositions has been a two-step process. Firstly, within-case analysis has been carried out. Within-case analysis provides a stand-alone description of cases and allows one to explore what is unique about the cases (Mills, Durepos, Wiebe, 2009, p. 971). However, a second step – namely the exploration of what connects the cases, their integration – has also been part of the process. The tool of

pattern matching, “whereby several pieces of information from the same case” were connected to a theoretical proposition (Yin, 2002, p. 26), has been utilized to fit the cases in a broader theoretical framework of mediation opportunity structures.

- (5) Finally, one needs to identify the relevant criteria for interpreting the findings. In the dissertation I point to four such criteria, these are the issues of: (1) generalizability; (2) causal or narrative analysis; (3) the nature of theory; and (4) authenticity (Hammersley & Gomm, 2000, p. 5).

3. Research results

As a contextual analysis, the thesis first provides a narrative description of the construction and contestation of *crisis* dominated by the Fidesz, and the interconnections between the factors that influence this mediatized formation of crisis-discourses and the dynamic nature of these relationships.

This chapter is followed by the three case studies. First I detail lessons learned from the analysis of Migration Aid. This chapter explores the impact of social networking sites on social movements and collective action. In this case study, I contextualize the group's activities, exploring how they relate to the broader political environment, arguing for a need to reexamine the concept of contentious politics. I explore the characteristics that make connective action possible, with an emphasis on the group's rhizomatic structure. The findings detail the characteristics of the rhizomatic organization and how these characteristics shape the group's action repertoire. Afterwards I move on to discuss the counter-billboard campaign of the Hungarian mock-party, the Two-Tailed Dog Party. It argues that the campaign's action repertoire innovatively connected acts of feel-good activism in order to address wider audiences. With the help of the counter-billboard campaign people holding a minority opinion were given a platform and visibility in the public. It also challenged official statements about the governmental campaign through uncovering inconsistencies in governmental communication. Through memetic engineering, the original messages were altered and mocked in a satirical manner and the outcomes were brought back to the streets of Hungary. The

campaign used an innovative combination of several low-cost activities, which proved to be a successful strategy. On a deeper level the counter-campaign challenged the hegemonic views about public discourse. It effectively contrasted the government's one-to-many, top-bottom approach to political communication with a campaign that relied on many-to-many communication and a bottom-up approach. The last case study introduces the Martonfa-movement. It examines how a local social movement in Martonfa – opposing the building of a refugee camp – developed during the summer of 2015. The aim of the chapter is to unpack the effects of a perceived threat to this local community. When constructing the movement's diagnostic frame, it is not the problem of the refugee but that of democratic decision-making that is heavily emphasized. In line with this, the prognostic action frame contains very few details regarding possible solutions or strategies to tackle the issue. The motivational frame centers on 'calling to arms' possible allies and partners.

Following these empirical chapters, I move on to explain the model in which the findings can be interpreted: mediation opportunity structures in hybrid regimes. I argue that understanding the dynamics of protest and social movements in contemporary autocratic contexts demands that we pay attention to three issues: 1) the structural power of the state to dominate the mainstream media discourse; 2) the logic of right-wing populism that set limits to public discourse; and 3) a new re-feudalization of the public sphere where top-bottom, unidirectional propaganda tools aim to replace forms that promote dialogue. The findings show that the application of mediation theory to contentious

action in hybrid regimes allows for a nuanced and multi-layered understanding of opportunities and constraints of such action. The paper claims that it was the populist construction of the ‘refugee crisis’ that allowed the Orbán-government to solidify its power. A transformational shift took place in the Hungarian mediatized opportunity structure beginning in 2015, the results of which are still affecting present day processes and that will have a lasting influence on Hungarian society. Social movement responses to these processes were not able to counter these effects, partly due to the organizational ecology, attacks on civil society, and partly due to their limited role-definition. The use of their narrative and disruptive capacities nevertheless crucially contributed to sustaining a subaltern counterpublic in Hungary – but did not lead to the emergence of an oppositional movement.

4. Publications

Together with my colleague, Tibor Dessewffy we first studied Migration Aid, a grassroots movement born on Facebook that became the hub of humanitarian responses provided to refugees in the summer of 2015. The result of this research was an article that appeared in the *International Journal of Communication* that detailed the repertoires of the group and their rhizomatic structure (Dessewffy & Nagy, 2016). Not ready to leave my focus on the local behind, I was also intrigued by the case of Martonfa, a small village in Southern Hungary, that, during the summer of 2015 learned from the news that the Hungarian government would establish a refugee camp on their territory and that built an anti-refugee camp movement as a response to that. Having set up the fence at the border, the government abandoned their proposal of the Martonfa refugee camp, which the locals interpreted as a success of their movement. My research, published in *Kötő-jelek*, examined the collective action frames utilized by this movement and how they relate to the structural deficiencies of the movement (Nagy, 2017). Finally, by the fall of 2015 it became clear that the discursive efforts of the Hungarian government were of significant importance parallel with their policy responses to the arrival of the refugees, their aim to construct and redefine the crisis became a mobilizing force among Hungarians either sharing or opposing their narrative. Significantly, the first billboard campaign of the government – which was followed by numerous such campaigns and have become a staple of government communication – was countered by a crowdfunded and crowdorganized anti-billboard campaign initiated by the Hungarian

mock-party, Two-Tailed Dog Party (Kétfarkú Kutypárt). This response was not only significant in its volume (the counter-billboards almost outnumbering the official ones) but in its innovative repertoires as well. My research focused on these innovations and the structure and effects of the campaign, which I published in *Intersections* in 2016 (Nagy, 2016). By this time, it became clear that the structure of my doctoral thesis will take the shape of an article-based PhD, connecting these case studies in a broader framework. Based on a number of theoretical considerations my attempt to create a model to interpret these findings resulted in a paper published in the edited volume, *Current Perspectives on Communication and Media Research* in 2018 that discusses how these movements relate to the mediation opportunity structures that surround them in present-day Hungary (Nagy, 2018).

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